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BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE & RESEARCH
OFFICE OF ANALYSIS FOR EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC

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CHINA LIGHTS

Report No. 185, January 9, 1990

- I. The PLA And The Eighth Five-Year Plan
- II. Update On Chinese Study Abroad
- III. SACO Revisited
- IV. High Stress In Zhongnanhai
- V. Analyst In Wonderland

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I. THE PLA AND THE EIGHTH FIVE-YEAR PLAN

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II. UPDATE ON CHINESE STUDY ABROAD

Recently available data shed new light on--and raise new questions about--the number of Chinese students abroad and the number specifically in the US.

[REDACTED] by the end of 1990 China was to have sent more than 110,000 students overseas for study since 1978, a figure significantly higher than that indicated by Chinese published statements. Of the total, more than 60,000 have gone to the US. Of these, only about 10,000 have returned to China, leaving some 50,000 still studying in the US. This is significantly more than the commonly cited US figure of 40,000, but relatively consistent with figures derived by an INR examination of US visa statistics.

21

Published Chinese figures... Chinese published figures on the number of students sent abroad for study between 1978 and 1990 are relatively consistent, if sometimes confusing or misleading. According to numerous official statements in 1989 and 1990, China had sent about 80,000 students overseas for study, including 55,000-60,000 government sponsored students and 20,000-25,000 self-funded students. Of the total of government sponsored students, 40,000 reportedly were visiting scholars or researchers, 20,000 were graduate students pursuing advanced degrees, and only 1,000 were undergraduate students.

Of the total of 80,000 students sent abroad, 30,000-32,000 were said to have returned to China, a return rate of about 40 percent. The rate of return for various categories of students varies widely, however. According to Chinese statements, between 90-95 percent of the officially sponsored visiting scholars and researchers sent abroad have returned, while only about 1,000 of the 25,000 self-funded students have permanently gone back to China.

...understate the case. [REDACTED] between 1978 and 1989 more than 100,000 Chinese had gone abroad to seek post-bachelor degrees, a number which was expected to increase to 110,000 by the end of 1990. Of the total, some 40,000 had returned. [REDACTED] between 70,000

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and 80,000 currently remain abroad, a figure not consistent with his statements on the total number of people who have gone and returned. Moreover, [redacted] figures indicate that some 8,000 to 10,000 people had returned permanently to China in 1989-90, a total that seems implausibly high.

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Chinese students in the US - the US University view.

According to figures recently published by the Institute of International Education (IIE), US colleges and universities report a total of 33,390 Chinese students enrolled in addition to about 9,000 visiting scholars. The combined total appears to be the source of the figure of 40,000 Chinese students in the US widely cited in the media. The methodology used by IIE, however, relies on reporting by US universities, and is believed to undercount the actual number of foreign students. Moreover, differences in record keeping by universities also raise questions about the accuracy of IIE's figures. Some universities, for example, do not include graduate students doing research for Ph.D. dissertations as "students."

Chinese students in the US - the Visa Line View. INR's

recent examination of statistics on visas issued to Chinese students found that a total of 37,000 F-1 (student) visas were issued to Chinese between 1979 and the first half of FY 1990. Of these, 6,700 are known to have adjusted their visa status to permanent resident, and a few visas may have been issued but not used. Thus, the total number of self-funded students to be accounted for numbers about 30,000. In addition, US consular personnel have issued more than 57,000 J-1 visas for Chinese "exchange scholars" to visit the US. About one-fourth of these are believed to have been enrolled as graduate students, with the remainder consisting of visiting scholars or researchers. Thus, China appears to have sent some 17,000 long-term students to the US on "J" visas, for a presumed total of about 47,000 long-term students.

These figures may overstate slightly the number of students who have come to the US, however, because they double-count people who have returned to China for brief stays and are then issued another visa to go back to the US to continue their studies. Until recently, there was no way to estimate reliably the number of such short-term returnees. However, [redacted]

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in 1989 some 700 students had returned from the US to China for brief stays before going back to the US to continue their studies. About 900 students returned to China briefly in 1990. Given the smaller number of students in previous years, and the shorter average period of residence in the US, the numbers returning to China for brief visits was probably less than 700. As a result, the total of 47,000 long-term students should be reduced by at least 1,600, and more likely by 2,000-2,500.

Chinese students in the US - [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] about 60,000 students had gone to the US to study as of the end of 1990. Assuming that [REDACTED] meant 60,000 out of the 100,000 sent as of 1989, 60 percent of all Chinese students abroad went to the US, a proportion consistent with US-based research. Some Chinese statements, however, have indicated that the US accounts for a smaller percentage of China's total overseas student enrollment. Among the 60,000 students sent to the US were 34,000 officially sponsored and 26,000 self-funded students. Of the total, only about 10,000 had returned, an overall return rate of only 17 percent.

[REDACTED] figure of 34,000 "officially sponsored students" is significantly higher than INR's estimate of 17,000-20,000. [REDACTED] figure, however, may include visiting Chinese scholars and researchers while INR's estimate includes only officially sponsored long-term students. If so, his total falls far below the 57,000 such visas issued by the US. Moreover, if [REDACTED] figures are accurate and include visiting scholars, they raise serious questions about the accuracy of published Chinese statements that the return rate of such scholars is 90-95 percent. Even if all 10,000 returnees reported [REDACTED] were visiting scholars, this would amount to a return rate of only about one-third.

The "hidden" student population. [REDACTED] figure for self-funded students is significantly smaller than INR's figure of about 37,000 F-1 visas issued. But, [REDACTED] the figure of 110,000 overseas students does not include "several ten thousands" of people studying foreign languages abroad. Virtually all of these are self-funded and would receive US F-1 visas. According to various press reports, the total number of such students in Japan is at least 35,000, and may be as high as 47,000. Perhaps as many as 30,000 such students are studying English in Australia. No estimate for the number of self-funded language students is available for the US, but such students could easily account for the discrepancy of several thousand between the number of US "F-1" visas issued and the Chinese estimate of 26,000 self-funded degree students.

(CClarke) (CONFIDENTIAL)

III. SACO REVISITED

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IV. HIGH STRESS IN ZHONGNANHAI

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